

# MARK BERTRAND, BOY DETECTIVE

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AUTHOR OF *BACK ON MURDER*

**The diplomas aren't on the wall anymore, but I still have them.** I had a badge, too, but it was stolen by a friend of my college roommate—another story entirely. By the age of sixteen, I'd graduated from not one but two mail-order schools of private investigation. First came the Rouse School of Private Investigation, whose lessons arrived complete with a catalog for ordering special detective gear. Then, feeling I still needed to polish my skills, I enrolled in the Global School of Investigation, which supplemented its written lessons with a series of audio lectures.

My agency was headquartered in the unfinished attic of my parents' home, which was situated at the end of a long country road on the outskirts of a small Louisiana town. As a result, there wasn't much foot traffic. I kept office hours in the afternoon, usually accompanied by my pre-teen brother. Despite our sign out on the street, nobody turned up in need of a private eye.

Thanks to a friend of my father, I had a box of olive drab business cards advertising my services, complete with a Sherlock Holmes silhouette and a magnifying glass. I used my position on the school newspaper to arrange an interview with a real private detective downtown, but I couldn't bring myself to mention my own credentials or my availability for contract work.

So there I was, an overqualified, inexperienced teenaged detective. It's hard to imagine these days, but I even had a gun, a Beretta Model 84 chambered for .380 ACP rounds. I couldn't carry it, of course. Apart from one roadside ambush accompanied by my dad, I hadn't even fired it. But thanks to the Rouse catalog I did have an appropriate holster should the need arise.

I had a portable fingerprint kit, too. Several, in fact. During my one and only investigation, this proved vital.

**The break-in occurred while we were at church.** The family returned to our isolated homestead to find the glass pane nearest the door lock busted out. I advised caution and made sure no one touched anything. Inside, the only damage we could find was to my parents' bedroom, where the burglar had dumped out jewelry boxes and drawers in search of things to steal. When the police arrived, I was ready to observe my first burglary investigation. Instead, I witnessed a much more common law enforcement procedure: filling out a report for the insurance.

Before the uniforms left, I mentioned the possibility of fingerprints on the doorknob or perhaps the broken glass. They reacted as if they'd never heard of fingers, let alone any swirl patterns that might be on their tips. I'd been prepared for this by my study of Arthur Conan Doyle. The constabulary rarely welcomes input from a consulting detective.

After they left, I unzipped my portable fingerprint kit and got to work. Sure enough, there were prints on the knob. I dusted and brushed, then used special tape from my Rouse kit to transfer them to a card. Naturally, I already had my brother's prints on file, so was able to eliminate him from the enquiry immediately. My parents had a good alibi, so they were out to.

Unfortunately, my resources were limited. Not having a database of prints on file for comparison, I found there was nothing I could do with my evidence but hold onto it. I've lost track of it now, so there's little hope of a conviction.

**The bitter aftertaste of this failed investigation didn't last long.** I had a friend whose father ran his own security company, doing private investigation on the side. He also had an interest in writing. We trekked together to Beaumont, Texas to attend a writing conference by Dwight Swain, pretty much the only men present. When the ladies -- mostly aspiring romance novels -- asked who we were, Rod told them we worked for the CIA. If they seemed dubious, he turned to me. "Show them your badge."

During our drives back and forth to Texas, which continued off and on as new writer's meetings took place, we talked about my private detective training. Rod invited me to tag along with him on his "rounds," with a view to perhaps doing some more serious work later on. Graduation was nearing, so I had a lot on my plate, but I could hardly pass up an opportunity like this.

What I remember from that time is a bit of a blur. Rod drove me around one night to the various bars where his people did security. Outside a gay bar called, if I remember correctly, El Mirage, a lippy man leaned in through the

passenger window and asked, “Who’s your little friend?” I was quick to assure him that, though we were friends, I was not a little friend, too defensive by half.

There was a surveillance, too, out in the sticks not far from where I lived. A house off Nelson Road. We sat in the car behind a stand of trees for awhile. Rod showed me his gun, a .45 Star PD, a piece which has held a particular mystique for me ever since. Throughout the stake-out, I never actually saw a person, and after an hour or so, he called it off. This was a long-term project, apparently, something he worked on in his spare time.

I’m not sure what happened to my ambitions. When I started looking at colleges, my plan was to study criminal justice. I still have a textbook preemptively purchased in the Mississippi College bookstore during my walk-through, which I read over the summer to get a leg up on the other freshmen. By the time I actually matriculated, though, I’d decided to write about crimes and misdemeanors, not investigate them. I was an English major who had a shoe box full of souvenirs from his days as a boy detective: a brass badge in a thick leather wallet, some Smith & Wesson handcuffs, a couple of portable fingerprint kits, and some diplomas that are no longer on the wall. \*

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